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Bob Wiedrich

CIA's 'mobster' cut filmland swath



JOHN ROSSELLI, the gangster now a big cheese in a big stink over alleged Central Intelligence Agency schemes with the Mafia to murder Fidel Castro, used to ride shotgun on Harry Cohn, late boss of Columbia Pictures.

While acting as Cohn's bodyguard, showering ruby rings as gifts on the film czar, Roselli was also conspiring with other mobsters to shake down the movie industry for \$2.5 million in exchange for labor peace, kindly excluding Columbia Pictures from the plot.

Hollywood actress June Lang, tho, was another victim of his excesses. After two years of marriage, Miss Lang dumped the hoodlum in 1942 for embarrassing her publicly.

THAT WAS about the same time Roselli was posing as a Los Angeles stock broker and functioning as an assistant film producer and expert consultant on gangland movies, a subject with which he was well acquainted as West Coast shill of top Chicago mobsters.

Actually, that was how Roselli first came to Los Angeles—as the clandestine representative of the late Al Capone and Paul [The Waiter] Ricca—to establish a beachhead for Chicago mob money in L.A. and later Las Vegas.

For many years, the gangster peddled himself as John Roselli or John Roselli from Chicago, a man with the mystique of Midwest mobsters, who fit in neatly with other flashy Hollywood phonies of the late 1930s-early 1940s era.

So it wasn't until 1967 that the Immigration and Naturalization Service discovered records in Chicago had been forged to reflect a birth that never happened.

Roselli or Roselli was really Filippo Sacco, born in Esperia, Italy, brought to the United States illegally while a young child, and today a 70-year-old retired gangster living in Plantation, Fla., near Fort Lauderdale.

Sacco had been reared in the Boston area. He fled to Chicago and changed his name after being arrested on narcotics charges in Massachusetts in 1922.

Chicago proved to be only a short stop en route to Hollywood, after winning the sponsorship of Ricca and Capone. By the mid-1930s, Roselli was entrenched as a personal bookmaker to top moviemakers. Then he became a labor relations expert, an arena in which he refined his extortion techniques to eventually win a 10-year sentence in 1943 for the multimillion dollar movie industry shakedown.

By 1948, Roselli was paroled with the other imprisoned hoodlums, including Ricca, in a move that still reeks of mob clout today.

Then he became a film producer in Hollywood, formed his own independent movie company in 1952, and finally drifted off into self-imposed obscurity while reportedly functioning as a sidekick of then Los Angeles Mafia boss Jack Dragna. But all the time, he was still active in advancing Giancana's and Ricca's money goals in Las Vegas, by then a burgeoning gambler's paradise in the Nevada desert.

And it wasn't until 1967 that the roof fell in on Roselli and he was indicted for violating United States alien registration and interstate gambling laws.

Altho his claimed caper with the CIA had already occurred before and after the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, Roselli kept his mouth shut and took his medicine—another five-year sentence in federal prison. He never mentioned his claims to having been retained by the CIA with Giancana to use their pre-Castro regime connections in Havana to field assassination teams against Castro.

The interstate gambling charges were a dilly, in keeping with a man who now alleges to have been an agent of international espionage.

The exclusive Friar's Club in Beverly Hills, Cal., of which Roselli was a member, had been the scene of a streak of unbelievably bad luck for Hollywood celebrities and show biz millionaire hangers-on with a penchant for gambling.

By the time the Justice Department discovered what was going on, personalities like Tony Martin, Zeppo Marx, and Phil Silvers had been taken for some \$400,000 along with millionaires like Chicago camera manufacturer Theodore Briskin and shoe magnate Harry Karl, then married to actress Debbie Reynolds.

ROSSELLI AND three pals, it developed, had rigged gin rummy games by installing a ceiling peep hole thru which a colleague could signal electronically the kind of cards the celebrities were holding.

In 1970, Roselli emerged briefly from prison to testify under immunity before an L.A. federal grand jury about Giancana and the late Southern Cook County mob boss Frank La Porte. Then he returned behind bars until 1973, when he was released to retire to the Miami area where he remains today fighting a deportation order obtained last Jan. 10.

In that appeal, Roselli alleges he should be permitted to remain in the U. S. because of his services to the CIA in a time of need. But he swears privately to his chums that he will never rat on Uncle Sam. The strength of his fidelity, however, remains to be seen.

P-Wiedrich, Bob
Roselli, John
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CIA 4-01 ASSASSINATION